

President Without Mandate, LBJ Faced Bitterness, Fear

This is the second of 12 articles excerpted from LBJ's book, "The Vantage Point."

By LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON

In spite of more than three decades of public service, I knew I was an unknown quantity to many of my countrymen and to much of the world when I assumed office.

I suffered another handicap, since I had come to the presidency not through the collective will of the people but in the wake of tragedy. I had no mandate from the voters.

A few people were openly bitter about my becoming president. They found it impossible to transfer their intense loyalties from one president to another. I could understand this, although it complicated my task. Others were apprehensive. This was particularly true within the black community. Just when the blacks had had their hopes for equality and justice raised, after centuries of misery and despair, they awoke one morning to discover that their future was in the hands of a president born in the South.

YET IN SPITE of these yearnings for a fallen leader, in spite of some bitterness, in spite of apprehensions, I knew it was imperative that I grasp the reins of power and do so without delay. Any hesitation or wavering, any false step, any sign of self-doubt, could have been disastrous.

During my first 30 days in office I believe I averaged no more than four or five hours' sleep a night. If I had a single moment when I could go off alone, relax, and forget the pressures of business, I don't recall it.

On Saturday morning, Nov. 23, I walked into McGeorge Bundy's office in the basement of the White House and received an international intelligence briefing from John McCone, director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

On that sad November morning in 1963, the international front was about as peaceful as it ever gets in these turbulent times. The world, it seemed, had ceased its turmoil for a moment — caught in the shock of John Kennedy's death.

PRESIDENT Kennedy had kept me well informed on world events, so I was not expecting any major surprises in that first intelligence briefing.

Only South Vietnam gave me real cause for concern. The next day, Nov. 24, I received my first full-dress briefing from Henry Cabot Lodge, who had just returned to Washington from his post as ambassador in Saigon. But compared with later periods, even the situation in Vietnam at that point appeared to be relatively free from the pressure of immediate decisions.

The most important foreign policy problem I faced was that of signaling to the world what kind of man I was and what sort of policies I intended to carry out.

On Monday, Nov. 25, I met with President Charles de Gaulle of France. Just a few hours before our conversation, I received a report from Paris of a recent meeting between De Gaulle and an Allied ambassador. They had discussed what the European response would be in the event of a Soviet invasion of Western Europe.

PRESIDENT de Gaulle, according to the report, had said that the United States could not be counted on in such an emergency. He mentioned that the United States had been late in arriving in two world wars and that it had required the holocaust of Pearl Harbor to bring us into the latter.

With this account fresh in my mind, I met with the French president. I thanked him for crossing the Atlantic to express the sympathy of France in our hour of sadness.

The general spoke of the affection that both he and the French people had felt for John Kennedy. He then went on to say that the difficulties between our two countries had been greatly exaggerated, and that while changing times called for certain adjustments in our respective roles, the important thing was that Frenchmen knew perfectly well they could count on the United States if France were attacked.

I STARED hard at the French president, suppressing a smile. In the years that followed, when De Gaulle's criticism of our role in Viet-

nam became intense, I had many occasions to remember that conversation. The French leader doubted — in private, at least — the will of the United States to live up to its commitments. He did not believe we would honor our NATO obligations, yet he criticized us for honoring a commitment elsewhere in the world. If we had taken his advice to abandon Vietnam, I suspect he might have cited that as "proof" of what he had been saying all along: that the United States could not be counted on in times of trouble.

Having met with the leader of France, our oldest ally, I turned to our relations with an adversary: the Soviet Union. On Tuesday morning, Nov. 26, Soviet Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan came to my office. I knew that I was dealing with one of the shrewdest men ever to come up through the Communist hierarchy, one of the few surviving Bolsheviks with real power. Mikoyan had been brought to Moscow by Stalin in 1926, had escaped innumerable purges, and had demonstrated an uncanny ability to survive and to associate himself with the right faction at the right time.

WE TALKED for 55 minutes, and the conversation was not all diplomatic pleasantries. I remembered how Nikita Khrushchev had misjudged President Kennedy's character and underestimated his toughness after their 1961 meeting in Vienna. That misjudgment, many people believe, led Khrushchev to test the United States with a new crisis in Berlin. I considered it essential to let Mikoyan understand that while the United States wanted peace more than anything